JACK ANDERSON

FBI Informer Was Traveling In Murder Car

The Justice Department today will put into effect "clarifications" that will relax its guidelines for the investigation of suspected subversive groups. Among other things, the restrictions on undercover informers will be loosened.

Today also marks the opening of a trial that involves this very point: the FBI's handling of an informer involved in the slaying of a civil-rights activist, Viola Liuzzo, 18 years ago this week. Internal FBI documents on the case show that, if anything, the government's investigations of political groups should be under even tighter control—and the control should start right at the top.

Liuzzo, 39, a white mother of five from Detroit, was killed on March 25, 1965, as she and a 19-year-old black man were driving between Selma and Montgomery, Ala., after the famous civil-rights march organized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Four members of the Ku Klux Klan pulled up alongside the Liuzzo car on a lonely stretch of road and loosed a volley of shots. Liuzzo was killed. Her companion was not hit; he survived by playing dead after the car ran off the road into a fence.

One of the four men in the Klan car was Gary Thomas Rowe, an FBI informer. His testimony later helped convict the three other men of federal civil-rights violations, but it was never established exactly who shot Liuzzo.

The Liuzzo children are suing the government, claiming that the FBI was negligent in its handling of Rowe.

My associates Tony Capaccio and Indy Badhwar have examined hundreds of internal FBI documents, which make clear that the FBI's behavior goes shockingly far beyond negligence.

Evidently aware of the embarrassment the FBI would suffer from the presence of its undercover informer in the murderers' car, Director J. Edgar Hoover marshaled the bureau's resources to blacken the dead woman's reputation. This came at a time when the bureau was also trying to smear King and find links between King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Communist Party.

Within 24 hours of Liuzzo's murder, a summary document prepared for top FBI officials reported: "Mrs. Liuzzo had puncture marks in her arm indicating recent use of a hypodermic needle."

Liuzzo's husband, Anthony, a Teamsters union business agent in Detroit, also caught a little of the FBI's mud. The day after the shooting, Hoover reported in a memo to his top subordinates that President Johnson had checked with him before making a condolence call to Liuzzo, "because our report indicated the man is a Teamster."

Hoover's memo continued: "I told the president I don't say the man has a bad character, but he is well known as a Teamster strongman, and on the woman's body was [sic] found numerous needle marks, indicating she had been taking dope, although we can't say that definitely because she is dead."

Hoover's memo concluded: "I said I would be inclined to have [White House aide Lee] White or someone like that talk to the husband rather than the president. The president said all right." In fact, however, Johnson did call Liuzzo.

Hoover escalated his smear campaign against the dead woman when he talked with Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach.

"I stated the man himself [Liuzzo] doesn't have too good a background, and the woman had indications of needle marks in her arms where she had been taking dope; that she was sitting very, very close to the Negro in the car; that it had the appearance of a necking party."

Hoover's diligent efforts to depict Liuzzo as a junkie were killed by the autopsy report a week later.